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ABSTRACT

Retention research in the four-year college setting has traditionally assumed that students intend to achieve a degree, and that when a student leaves school, either the college or the student has failed. In an effort to demonstrate that such assumptions do not apply when examining retention among two-year college students, Brookdale Community College (BCC) began administering an Entering Student Survey to new students in fall 1988 to gather information about their academic goals and expectations, comparing survey results with subsequent retention behavior. Of the 3,590 new BCC students in fall 1988, 2,243 students (62%) completed usable surveys. A typology developed from survey responses was used to group the students into three categories: students intending to transfer (51.7%); students preparing for a career (37.8%); and students taking classes out of personal interest (10.5%). Study findings included the following: (1) 44.8% of the students indicated an intention to graduate from BCC, with 24.2% undecided; (2) 50% of both career and transfer students intended to graduate; (3) retention patterns for the five subsequent semesters revealed a mean attendance of 1.7 semesters, with the highest retention rates among the transfer group; (4) students who indicated an intention to graduate had higher persistence rates than those not intending to graduate; and (5) analysis of variance revealed that entering students' academic goals and intentions significantly affected retention. Data tables and graphs are included. (PAA)

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Student Intention and Retention in a Community College Setting

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STUDENT INTENTION AND RETENTION IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE SETTING

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Background

The majority of theory and research regarding student retention has sought to uncover the reasons why a student does or does not remain in a particular institution and eventually earn a degree. The four year college or university has been the usual setting for this research. Factors such as sex, race, program of study, previous academic success, and SAT scores have been examined for possible causal links to retention.

Implicit in these studies is this assumption: all college students consider the achievement of a degree one of their major goals. If they don't intend to get one from their current institution, then they intend to transfer and get one from another institution. The purpose of measuring retention, then, is to see how well a particular institution is able to hold onto its students. When a student neither graduates nor transfers a failure has occurred on either the part of the student or the institution.

Community college personnel are well aware that their students do not measure up to the 'traditional' student profile. One-year retention of students at public 2 year colleges averages only 55%! (Beal and Noel, 1980) Under the four-year paradigm, then, it would be easy to conclude that either the 2-year colleges or their students are failing.

But do all college students really want to earn a degree? Certainly there are a wide variety of reasons for enrolling in higher education. Students have goals which can include intellectual, career, personal development, or family related elements, to mention a few. Some of these goals require the attainment of a degree, some do not. The broad educational missions, open admissions policies, and low tuitions of most community colleges make them the ideal institution for students with non-traditional goals. If we could learn why students are enrolling in community colleges, then we could better measure their degree of success.

Data Collection

In the Fall of 1988, Brookdale Community College began to administer an Entering Student Survey. The purpose of the project was to gather information about students' goals, expectations, and situations at the time of their initial enrollment. Questions for the survey were developed by a committee which represented various parts of the campus. The instrument consisted of the following 5 sections:

Part 1	15 multiple choice items regarding students' current situations and their short and long term plans for education.
Part 2	26 different goals are rated as being a 'major reason,' 'minor reason,' or 'not a reason' for attending Brookdale.
Part 3	Students indicate whether or not they would like to participate in 11 types of student activities.
Part 4	33 factors are rated as being 'very important,' 'moderately important,' 'slightly important,' or 'not important' in choosing Brookdale over other educational alternatives.
Part 5	4 pieces of demographic information are collected.

Of the 3,590 students new to Brookdale in Fall 1988, 2,719 completed our survey. Some surveys could not be used since the student never actually registered, essential information was missing, or for other reasons. Removing these surveys left a total of 2243, or 62% of the entering students.

Student Intention

Survey items which will be used in this analysis come from sections 1 and 2 of the instrument. Upon examination, many of the 26 items from Part 2 were found to be either confusing to students or too vague for use in this analysis. For example, the item 'To earn a college degree' is vague in that it does not specify whether the student wishes to earn an Associate's, Bachelor's, or both degrees. Some students found some of the long items confusing, responding with 'major reason' to both 'To obtain my Associate Degree and then transfer to another college' and to 'To take a few courses and then transfer to another college.'

In order to overcome these difficulties and make as much use as possible of the items in Part 2, a typology was developed using some of the items. According to students' 'major

reason' responses only, students were placed into one of three goal categories: transfer, career, or personal interest. 'Minor reason' responses were not used. The following items were used to create the typology:

Type	Item(s) with Major Reason Response
Transfer	To earn my Associate Degree and transfer to another college
	To take a few courses and then transfer to another college
Career	To increase my earning power
	To obtain my Associate Degree and then obtain appropriate employment
	To take a few job related courses
	To take a few courses and then get an appropriate job
	To prepare for a new career
Personal Interest	To study new and different subjects
	To take some courses for my own interest

The items used to create the typology were chosen on the basis of content and internal consistency of student responses with other survey items (generally Part 1 items.) Priority was given to the transfer category, then the career category, and finally the personal interest category. Therefore if a student gave a response of 'major reason' to the items 'To take a few courses for personal interest and then transfer to another college' and to 'To take some courses for my own interest,' then the student was categorized as a transfer student. In order to be placed in the personal interest category, the student must have responded with 'major reason' to one of the personal interest items but not to any of the transfer or career items.

According this typology, the 2243 students in our sample were categorized as follows:

Transfer	1121	51.7%
Career	820	37.8%
Personal Interest	227	10.5%
(unclassified)	75	

One of the items from Part 1 of the survey pertains to students graduation plans. The responses to this item are as follows:

Do you plan to graduate from Brookdale?

Yes	994	44.8%

No	687	31.0%
Undecided	538	24.2%
(missing)	24	

We can see from these responses that Brookdale students do indeed have a variety of educational goals. While 52% are interested in transferring and 38% in pursuing a career, only 45% of entering students are planning on getting a degree from Brookdale. Table 1 explores the relationship between student intent and plans for graduation.

Table 1

	Transfer	Career	Personal Interest
Do you plan to graduate from Brookdale?			
Yes	561 50%	403 50%	19 9%
No	306 27%	206 25%	133 59%
Undecided	248 22%	203 25%	72 32%

From Table 1 we see that there are differences in the degree earning plans of the three intention groups. Transfer and career students are similar in their plans to graduate from Brookdale - 50% intend to graduate, roughly 25% do not, and roughly 25% are undecided. On the other hand, 9% of personal interest students intend to graduate, 59% do not, and 32% are undecided. These differences are statistically significant at $p<0.0000$ ($X^2=156.3$, d.f.=4).

Student Retention

Having established that entering Brookdale students have a variety of goals and plans, we can use this information to test the hypothesis that student intention at the time of entry has an effect on future enrollments. For this analysis enrollment data for five semesters beyond Fall 1988 was taken from the Colleges student database. The semesters available for analysis are Spring 1989, Summer 1989, Fall 1989, Spring 1990, and Summer 1990.

Community college students often do not exhibit traditional enrollment patterns. Sometimes they enroll continuously,

sometimes they 'stop-out' and 'stop-in' for various lengths of time. Therefore, rather than compare enrollment in any particular semester, it would be more useful to compare the overall number of semesters beyond the first in which a student enrolled. A retention tally was developed from the above enrollment data by assigning a score of 1 for each semester of attendance, regardless of whether the student enrolled full-time, part-time, etc. Thus for this analysis the retention tally will range from zero to five semesters.

The outcome of this tally is as follows:

0 semesters	734	33%
1 semester	474	21%
2 semesters	285	13%
3 semesters	345	15%
4 semesters	261	12%
5 semesters	144	6%

The mean number of subsequent semesters attended is 1.7, the median is 1.0, and the mode is 0. A graph of this frequency distribution appears in Figure 1. The distribution is clearly not normal, a fact which affects the types of statistics used in this analysis.

When the retention tallies are broken down by the goal and graduation variables the following tables result.

Table 3 - Retention by Goal Type

Retention:	Transfer	Career	Personal Interest
0 semesters	235	348	112
	21%	42%	49%
1 semester	214	177	66
	19%	22%	29%
2 semesters	168	92	17
	15%	11%	8%
3 semesters	227	92	21
	20%	11%	9%
4 semesters	171	78	7
	15%	10%	3%
5 semesters	106	33	4
	10%	4%	2%

Figure 1

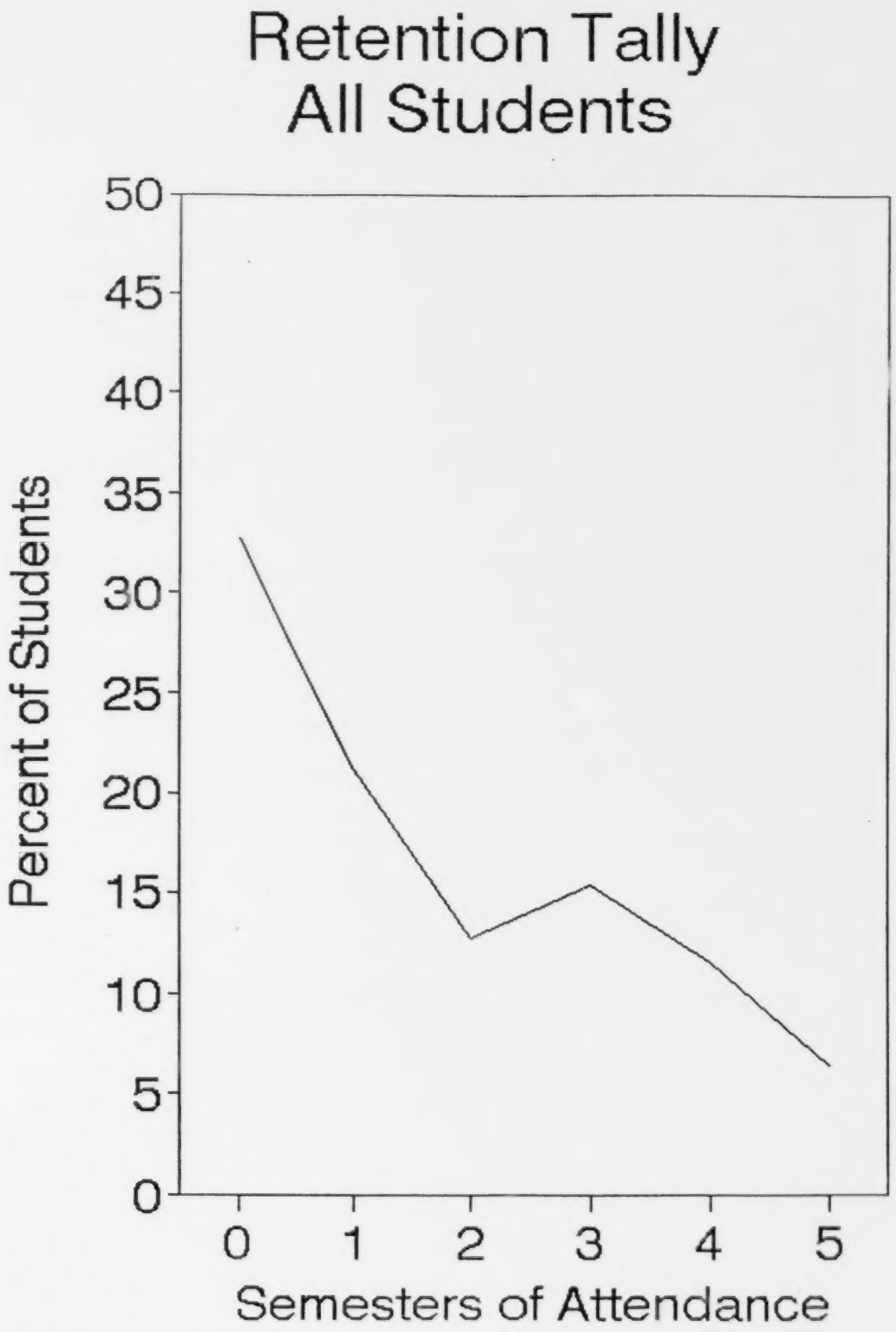

Retention Tally
All Students
Percent of Students
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
0
1
2
3
4
5
Semesters of Attendance

Figure 2

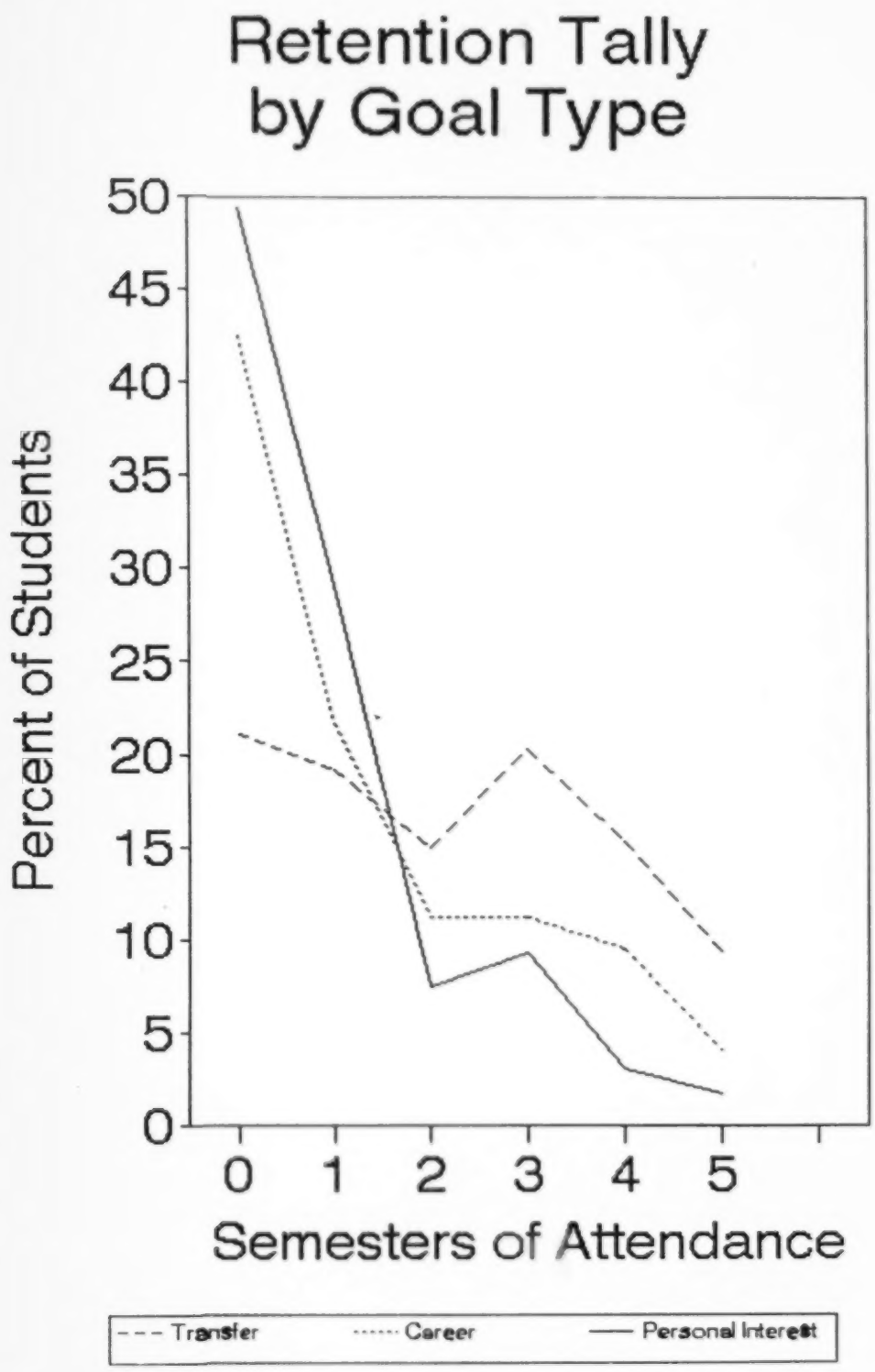

Retention Tally
by Goal Type
Percent of Students
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
0
1
2
3
4
5
Semesters of Attendance
Transfer
Career
Personal Interest

Figure 2 graphs the differences in these distributions. The transfer students produce a jagged line, with the number of students returning for 3 semesters almost as large as the number not returning. Career students produce a more curved line, with the largest group of students not returning at all and the number of students returning decreasing as the number of semesters increases. Personal interest students produce a pattern similar to the career students, but more extreme. The differences in this table are significant at the $p<0.0000$ level ($X^2=202.7$, d.f.=10.)

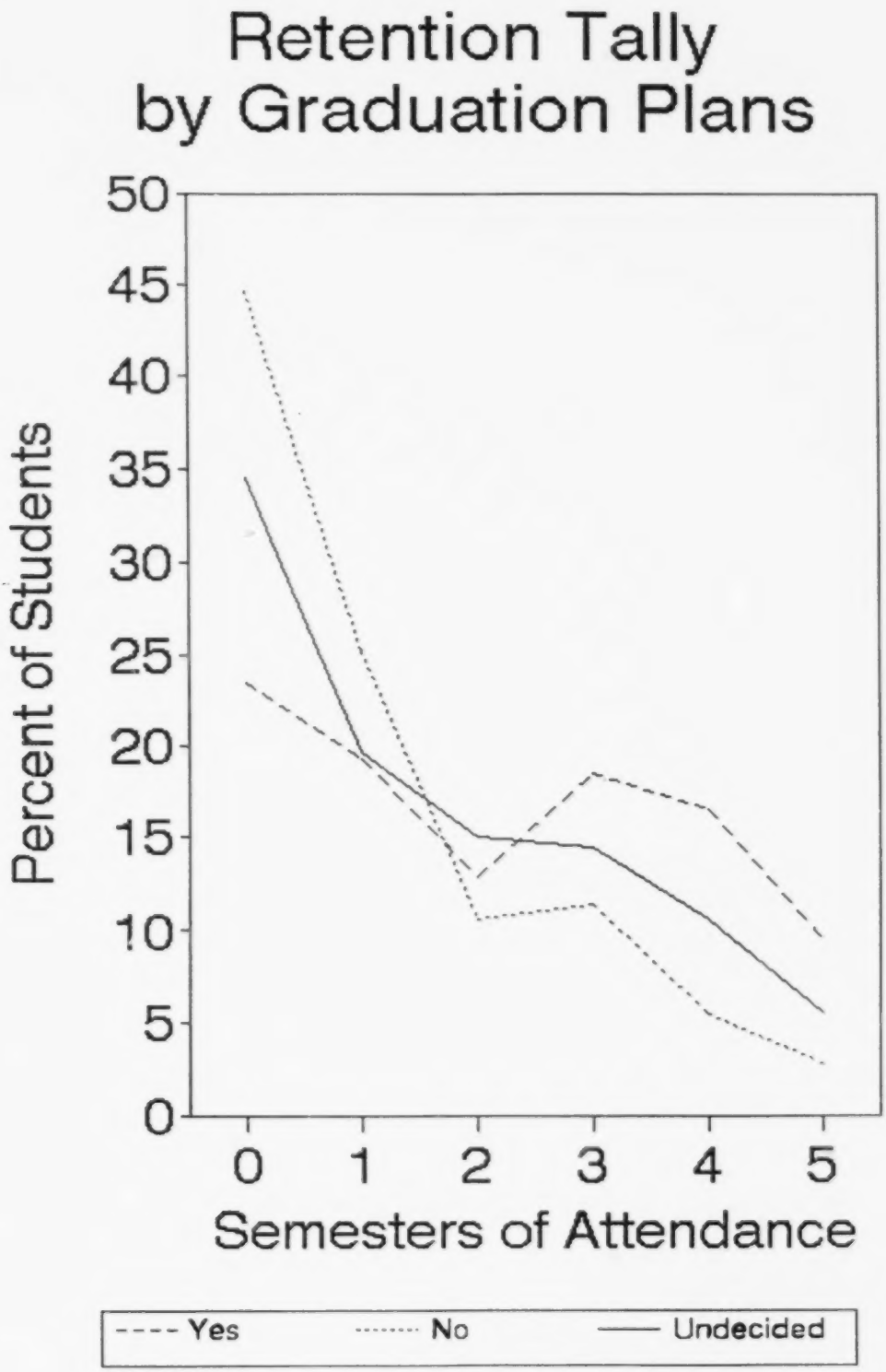
Table 4 - Retention by Graduation Plan

Retention:	Yes	No	Undecided
0 semesters	232 23%	307 45%	186 35%
1 semester	191 19%	173 25%	106 20%
2 semesters	128 13%	73 11%	81 15%
3 semesters	184 19%	78 11%	78 15%
4 semesters	164 17%	37 5%	57 11%
5 semesters	95 10%	19 3%	30 6%

The differences in these distributions are similar to those found in the previous breakdown, as graphed in Figure 3. Students who plan to graduate produce a jagged line with an slight overall slope down to the right. The undecided students produce a rough curve, with the number of students dropping off as the amount of enrollment increases. Those students who do not intend to graduate exhibit a dramatic curve, roughly exponential in shape. Again, the differences in Table 4 are significant at the $p<0.0000$ level ($X^2= 157.2$, d.f.=10.)

In order to further test the effect of student goal type and graduation plans on retention, the Kruskal-Wallis Analysis of Variance was performed. This is a non-parametric test which ranks all cases in the sample according to their value for the dependent variable, assigning each case an integer rank. The subgroups are then separated, and the average rank for each group is computed. If the null hypothesis is true the sub-

Figure 3


Retention Tally
by Graduation Plans
Percent of Students
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
0
1
2
3
4
5
Semesters of Attendance
Yes
No
Undecided

groups will have equal average ranks. The statistic used in the test, H, has approximately a X^2 distribution. The results of these tests, given below, demonstrate that there does appear to be a relationship between student intent and retention.

Graduation Plans	Mean Rank	
Yes	1272.76	
No	897.38	
Undecided	1080.80	
Cases: 2219	H: 148.6	p: 0.0000

Goal Type	Mean Rank	
Transfer	1254.46	
Career	936.32	
Personal Interest	780.47	
Cases: 2168	H: 182.1	p: 0.0000

Discussion

This analysis has confirmed what community college researchers have known all along - that our students have in mind a wide variety of goals and that these goals significantly affect their retention. This fact has serious implications for the validity of the traditional four-year retention model when applied to community college students. Simply stated, that model just doesn't work with community college students, their success must be measured in light of their individual goals and intentions.

The exact relationship between student intention and retention has yet to be determined. To fully develop a model for measuring student retention which allows for variation in students' intentions, more variables will have to be taken into account. Prime among these is a measure of whether students eventually achieve their educational goals, since the attainment of an Associate's Degree can no longer be regarded as a valid measure for all students.

As an attempt to begin to collect this data, Brookdale Community College has devised two follow-up surveys to our Entering Student Survey. These surveys will help us follow students' goals as they change over the course of their education, and determine whether students who do stop or drop out have attained their goals. We hope to use the results of these surveys to shed light on some of the many questions left unanswered by this study.

REFERENCES

Beal, Philip E. and Lee Noel What Works in Student Retention, 1980,The American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, p. 38.

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges

NOV 30 1990